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A Collection of
Yukon River Indian
Legends



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How Summer Came to the Yukon

An Indian Legend

ONCE UPON A TIME, many centuries ago, winter held the Yukon in its grasp for the entire twelve months of the year. Glaciers filled the hollows, and deep snow covered the whole country. There were no trees or bushes or flowers to be seen at any time, nor were there any lakes or rivers in the broad expanse of the territory. It was a land of perpetual cold.

One day a band of Indians were hunting, when they came upon a huge black bear. He was the largest animal they had ever seen; but what impressed them most was that he carried a sack suspended from a collar about his neck. The Indians had always held the bear in reverence, so instead of killing this animal they talked with him. One of the braves asked what the bag contained, and the bear told him it was filled with heat; that if this heat was released from the bag, summer would visit the Yukon for a portion of the year. Then the rivers would flow, the trees and flowers would spring from the ground, and there would be fish and berries in abundance.

The hunters could think of nothing they desired more than the possession of this bag, so one of the braves asked the bear what he would take in trade for it. The bear replied that he would not part with it for any consideration. The Indians coaxed, and they begged, but the bear was firm in his refusal. When they saw that it was useless to argue any longer, they decided to return to their tribe and think up some plan to get the coveted bag.

After hearing the story in detail, the chief called his braves together. Here was a prize worth having, and he didn't mean to let it get away. There was great discussion, and one of the learned men of the tribe suggested that as the bear was a very greedy animal, they might fill him up with food, after which he would lie down to sleep, and it would then be a simple matter to take the bag away from him. The chief thought this was a very good plan, so he ordered the hunters to invite the bear to eat with them.

A great feast was prepared. The daintiest parts of the caribou and moose were cooked up. Even if the bear were not hungry, he could not resist gorging himself with such tempting food.

In the meantime the hunters had gone forth in search of bruin, and when they located him they asked him to attend the feast that night. He readily accepted the invitation, and told them that as he was very hungry, he would appreciate a big meal.

That evening the bear arrived, but to the great disappointment of all the tribe, he did not bring the sack of heat with him. The feast was served, however, and after filling himself with the warm food, the bear grew drowsy and fell asleep. Then the chief called four of the best hunters in the village and ordered them to follow their guest home and forcibly take the sack from him.

The next morning the bear awakened, and after bidding his

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hosts farewell, left for his den. The four braves trailed him for about an hour, when they came to a large cave. Peering inside they saw the sack lying on the ground a few feet from the entrance. Standing guard over it on each side were two immense black bears.

However, the four men had been selected for their courage, and without hesitating, they entered the cave and demanded the sack. The bears sprang at them. Three of the hunters were instantly killed. The last man was struck down, mortally wounded, but before he expired he slashed the sack and released the heat.

Instantly the air grew warm, the snow began to melt, and the rivers and lakes came into being throughout the land. The hills and valleys were covered with trees and flowers, berry bushes grew everywhere, strange birds came in great numbers to build their nests, and the streams were filled with fish.

And every year since that time, summer has come to the Yukon.

An Indian Marriage in the Early Days of the Yukon Territory

COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE in the early days of the Yukon Territory were very different institutions from the present ideas of the young braves and squaws who do most of their courting in the moving picture shows, and demand the services of a clergyman at their wedding. From the standpoint of legality, the Canadian Government has always recognized the Indian marriage as perfectly binding. However, it is a question whether married life was any happier before the advent of the white man or not.

When the young brave of the early days saw the girl of his choice, he didn't go to call upon her. He didn't even speak to her. For the peace of mind of his neighbors it would have been better if he had. But, perched on a log or a stump outside her wigwam, he would sing a doleful love song hour after hour. To the unaccustomed ear the tune sounded like a cross between the wail of a husky and an asthmatic wheeze. There was only one verse, a literal translation being:

I am pitiful,
You come to me.
If you do come to me,
It will be very good.

After hours of this, if he was not shot at in the meantime, he left for his own wigwam. If the girl accepted his suit, she placed a pair of finely-worked moccasins on the stump or log where he had been crooning. When he spied them, he would pick them up and take them to his wigwam. That signified their engagement, provided there were no parental objections. The parents not only had the final say in the matter, but they made all arrangements for the wedding.

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Even after the engagement was sealed, the young brave did not speak to his fiance, nor did she ever address him. Whenever they met, she would cover her face with her hands or with a piece of moosehide.

When the parents had set the date for the marriage, they moved their wigwams side by side. Preparations were made for a feast of caribou and tea. At weddings after the coming of the first white men tobacco also was served, as smoking was indulged in by young and old.

As the hour approached for the ceremony, the bridegroom and his parents entered one of the wigwams, and sat down at one side of the fire which was built in the center. The bride and her parents then entered, followed by all her relatives, and they sat on the opposite side. Meat was eaten, not a word being spoken. Afterwards tea was given to each one present. Then pipes were lighted, and everybody smoked in silence.

In due time the father of the groom arose and gave a long talk, extolling the virtues of his boy. As a hunter and trapper, he could not be excelled. He was as handsome as Adonis and he had the grace of Apollo. His bravery was unquestioned. Surely the bride was fortunate to have secured such a husband.

When he had finished, the bride's father arose and gave a glowing account of his daughter. No girl in all the world was half as beautiful. In the art of tanning hides, she had no superior; and in fashioning garments she was without doubt the last word. The groom had made no mistake in choosing her.

Meanwhile the bride had been sitting with her hair plaited in braids and thrown over her face. After the speeches were finished, the groom reached forward and grasping the braids, hauled her across the fire to his side. If during the preliminaries, however, she suddenly changed her mind about marrying him, a struggle ensued, during which her parents beat his hands with sticks, and the match was off. If she raised no objection, she allowed herself to be hauled across the fire, and she sat down beside the groom. His parents then threw a blanket over the couple.

This completed the marriage ceremony.

The First Earthquake in the Yukon

*An Indian Legend concerning the Origin of the
Big Slide back of Dawson City, Yukon*

DURING the latter part of the eighteenth century the Moosehide tribe of Indians, who lived near the mouth of the Tron Deg (Klondike) River, had a princess of whom they were very proud. Like Snow White in the fairy tale, she was the most beautiful girl living. And she was exceptionally clever, too. None of the other girls were as well versed as she in the art of tanning the moose and

caribou hides and the furs which were brought into camp by the men of the tribe; and the moccasins and clothing fashioned by her deft fingers were patterns which even the most experienced of the squaws despaired of copying.

She was the idol of her people.

The fame of her beauty and accomplishments reached a neighboring tribe who lived about a hundred miles to the south. The chief of this tribe heard about the princess, and it set him to thinking. If he could arrange a marriage between his son and this royal lady, it would serve a double purpose. Not only would the old quarrels over hunting and trapping grounds be settled, but it would bring to his son a wife befitting his station in the tribe. The old chief pondered over this for many days, and eventually decided to have his son and a few of his braves accompany him on a state visit to the Moosehides.

It was early in the month of June when they pushed their canoes into the Yukon and started downstream on their journey to the mouth of the Tron Deg River. Arriving at their destination they were met by the chief of the Moosehides, who escorted them to the royal wigwam. After a feast of moose and caribou, the chief of the neighboring tribe explained the object of his mission. In glowing terms he extolled the virtues of his son. Never was a young man born who was such a wonderful hunter and trapper. No brave in the world possessed such courage. Wouldn't it be to their mutual advantage if his host gave to the young suitor the hand of the princess in marriage?

The Moosehides were stunned. Such a thing as taking away their princess, the idol of every man, woman and child in the village, was unthinkable. Their chief was asked by his counsellors to forbid the match, or at least to delay proceedings until they had time to think it over. Possibly something might happen to prevent their princess being taken away from them. They hoped so, anyway.

The visitors were tired after their long journey and, being assured that on the morrow they would be told whether the hand of the princess would be given to the young suitor, they lay down to sleep. By this time the news had spread through the Moosehide camp like wildfire, and the chief was beseeched by his subjects to forbid the wedding. Waving them aside he called a council of his advisors in an adjoining wigwam, where they could discuss ways and means of retaining the princess and still not offending their visitors.

It was finally decided that a task too difficult for any brave to perform was to be given to the young suitor, and if he failed, he lost the hand of the princess. He would be asked to show his prowess as a hunter, in order that he might prove himself worthy of such a bride. He would agree to start out alone and return in one year with the skins of fifty grizzly bears, one hundred black bears, one hundred moose, one hundred caribou, and one thousand foxes.

The Moosehides were well pleased with the answer they had

prepared. No brave could take that amount of game in a year. They could sleep now without any fear that their princess would be taken from them.

But they reckoned without their suitor. Long before his father was awake, the young man was walking about the village when he spied the princess in front of her wigwam. Following tribal custom, no words were exchanged; but one glance assured him that the fame of her beauty wasn't exaggerated. In fact it hadn't been half told. Then and there he decided that no obstacle should prevent his gaining the consent of her father to their marriage.

During the morning another feast was prepared for the visitors. After partaking of it, the chief of the Moosehides gave his answer. Disappointment was plainly evident on the faces of the guests excepting the young suitor, who showed no surprise at all. With the impetuosity of youth he whispered to his father to bind the bargain. Game was plentiful, and he could easily take the required number of skins in a year. After some discussion the father gave his consent, and the visitors left on their long voyage upriver.

In five sleeps' time they reached their village, and without delay the young man quietly made preparations for his trip. On the following morning long before any of his people were stirring, he set out alone.

Months went by, and the chief could get no information as to the whereabouts of his son. Neighboring tribes had not seen him. The father despaired of finding his boy alive, when during the following month of May there was great ado in the village. A raft was seen floating down the river, piled high with skins and manned by a solitary hunter. The excitement grew when the raft was skillfully poled into the eddy and the hunter proved to be the chief's son. The raft was quickly unloaded, and the skins counted. The old chief was greatly pleased when he saw that the young man had bagged the required number. There should be no further delay to the wedding.

It was arranged that only a few braves were to accompany the suitor on his visit to the Moosehides, and as the allotted year would soon be up, they started down river at once. When they arrived at the mouth of the Tron Deg, disappointment was very evident among the Moosehides. The suitor had brought the skins, and the only thing they could do was to part with the princess.

They had no intention of giving her up however, if there was any way to prevent it. First, they would have a feast and a sleep; then they would discuss the marriage.

While the visitors were sleeping, the chief of the Moosehides called his braves in council. He also summoned his medicine man, and asked him to find a way out of their difficulty. The medicine man promised a solution if they would obey his instructions. They were to prepare a feast and have a big dance on the following night. During the dance the braves were to separate. The visitors

were to line up against the hill, and the Moosehides opposite them. The medicine man then would work his charm, and they would see what would happen.

The directions were carried out. The feast was prepared, and after all the food was eaten, the dance commenced. Toward the early part of the morning, the braves separated. The visitors were in line at the very base of the hill, when the medicine man made strong medicine. Instantly there was a loud grumbling heard in the hillside, the earth began moving, and before the startled visitors could escape, they were buried in the slide.

This was the occasion for great rejoicing. The princess remained with her people until the end of her days.

The old squaws still caution the youngsters not to venture too near the slide after dark. On moonlight nights, to the accompaniment of loud wails, the ghosts of the buried braves can be seen treading the steps of the ancient dance on that fateful night; and while the youngsters scoff at this and contend that the howls emanate from a pack of malamutes in a voice-testing chorus, the old squaws, with many a wise nod, say they know better.

The Big Flood

A Legend of the Yukon Indians

MANY YEARS AGO, on a drowsy summer afternoon, a caribou waded out into the Yukon River to escape the horde of flies which were tormenting him. He reached a depth where his entire body was submerged with the exception of his head and neck. The air was warm, but the water was cool and soothing to his heated body; and the soft wind from the south lulled him to sleep.

As he slept he nodded, and with each succeeding nod his head lowered until his nose reached the water. A small grayling came swimming along nearby, and feeling in a playful mood touched the caribou on the nose. At this the caribou awakened with a start, and he was very angry. To think that a mite of a fish should have the audacity to disturb the slumber of a mighty caribou! He would dole out the proper punishment for so grave an offense. He would place the felon on the highest mountain peak where there wasn't a drop of water. That would show him what happened to small fish who molested big caribou.

So he picked up the grayling on his antlers and waded ashore. Looking around he spied a very high mountain. In fact it was the highest mountain in the world. That, he decided, would be the final resting place of this mischievous fish.

It was a long walk and a hard climb, but revenge was uppermost in the caribou's mind, as he plodded along to the foothills of the mountain. When he reached them he picked out the best

trail and started the ascent. He climbed and climbed until he reached the very top. Then he dropped the fish and lay down to rest.

The grayling, however, only laughed, and told his captor he would have no trouble in getting back to water. The caribou thought this was just another case of youthful boasting, and paid no attention to him. A fish couldn't walk, he couldn't jump, and he couldn't fly, so how could he ever hope to reach the river?

In his eagerness for revenge there was one point which the caribou hadn't even considered. He didn't know that this grayling had the powers of a medicine man, and that there was no task which he could not accomplish. If he couldn't get to the water, then he would bring the water to him.

As he lay there, the fish made big medicine. He ordered the clouds to send water, as his fathers had done on many occasions in the years gone by when the streams were low. Instantly the heavens opened and the rain came down in torrents. The storm increased in volume until the caribou could see nothing but the small pinnacle on which he stood. Creeks overflowed their banks, carrying trees and rocks in their mad rush down the hillsides. The Yukon rose higher and higher. The storm showed no signs of abating. Now the lower hills were submerged, and only the great mountain was visible above the surface of the water. Down pelted the rain with increasing fury.

Through the din of the storm could be heard the taunting voice of the grayling. The caribou was terror stricken. He realized only too well that his great strength was of no avail against the powers of a medicine man. He coaxed and pleaded, but the fish only laughed at him.

The water had now reached the feet of the caribou. The fish was submerged, and bidding a hasty farewell to his companion, swam gaily away. Overjoyed at his deliverance, he forgot to stop the medicine, and the rain continued in torrents, until finally the caribou was submerged and drowned.

Swimming along near the surface of the water, the grayling noticed that the clouds were still sending rain as he had commanded them; so he again made medicine and ordered them to cease. No sooner had he done this than the sky cleared and the sun shone brightly.

But the big flood which the grayling had brought forth to save himself had obliterated every living creature on the earth.

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